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ABSTRACT

This Massachusetts Kids Count report details the current condition of child care in the state of Massachusetts, discussing the importance of quality child care and the need to improve the affordability, access, and quality of Massachusetts child care. The report describes difficulties in finding child care and presents data on demand for child care. In addition, the shortage of child care is detailed, as are the supply of state-subsidized care and school-age care, and the location of child care services. The report discusses the costs and quality of child care and describes how Massachusetts offsets the high cost through subsidized care. The components of quality child care are delineated and the linkage between quality and child caregiver wages, benefits, and training is discussed. Finally, the report identifies strategies for improving child care accessibility, affordability, and quality and concludes with information on how Massachusetts citizens can get involved in building resources for children. (Contains 16 references.) (KB)

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Who's Minding the Children?

The State of Child Care in Massachusetts

ED 427 888

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"Questions about child care are both personal and political....The way that society answers or refrains from answering these questions is an important social experiment performed by our hearts and minds upon the next generation."

Angela Browne Miller, *The Day Care Dilemma: Critical Concerns for American Families*

ALL children

MASSACHUSETTS KIDS COUNT

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Who's Minding the Children?
The State of Child Care in Massachusetts

As more and more parents enter the workforce, a lack of affordable, high quality care for infants, preschool children, and school-age children has become a critical problem in our state. Nearly 500,000 of our children under age 12 have working parents (1). These parents need access to safe, reliable, convenient, and affordable child care so they can keep on working to build a secure future for their families (2).

Quality care provides the nurturing and stimulation that kids have always received from parents and relatives. In quality programs, well-trained and well-paid staff care for small groups of children in safe, clean, attractive surroundings, supplied with stimulating, age-appropriate activities and equipment. Parents are involved in many ways, and staff turnover is low.

Why Is Quality Care Important?

• **Quality child care is good for children.** The research evidence is overwhelming: quality early care and education can mean the difference between failing and passing in school, regular or special education, staying out of trouble or being involved in crime and delinquency, dropping out or graduating from high school (3). Compared to children in low quality programs, kids in high quality care are more secure and self-confident, less impulsive and aggressive, have better language and thinking skills, and are healthier (4).

• **Affordable, quality child care helps families work.** Both parents work in three out of four of New England's two-parent families (5). And one in four Massachusetts children is being raised by a single parent (6). Women now account for 61% of the state's labor force, a figure that has increased more than 20% since the mid-1970s (7). Paid work—and the affordable child care needed to support it—have become essential to family well-being because men's real wages (adjusted for inflation) have declined (5), and because changes in welfare laws have moved more parents into the labor force.

Why Address the Issue of Child Care?

"There are so many families where parents really want to work, but lack of access to affordable, high quality care is a barrier," says Elaine Fersh, director of Parents United for Child Care. Jason Sachs, of Boston EQUIP/Associated Day Care Services, agrees: "The challenge is to improve child care affordability, access, and quality so that all Massachusetts working parents can be secure in the knowledge that their kids are well cared for." Clearly, Massachusetts must work to:

- **Increase resources for low-income and working families to gain access to child care**
- **Support renovation and construction to increase the supply of high quality facilities**
- **Maintain and support a well-trained, well-paid child care work force.**

Access to Child Care

Finding child care is a daunting task for most working parents. For poor parents, child care can be a perpetual emergency of patched-together arrangements that quickly break down if someone gets sick or work hours change. Middle-income families may have more options, but finding the right caregiver while keeping the family budget intact is still a source of anxiety.

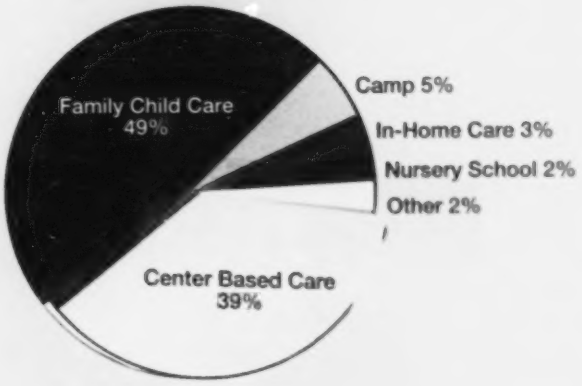
• **Demand for child care** If quality child care were available to everyone who wanted it, how many Massachusetts kids would be enrolled? The current best answer to that question—approximately 500,000 kids—is an estimate based on the number of our children under age 12 who have working parents (1). The figure doesn't include kids whose parents would work if they could find affordable care. And demand is growing. In fiscal year 1997, for example, calls to Child Care Resource and Referral programs (CCR&Rs) increased by 10%, and referral requests from families earning less than $23,000 annually grew by 46% (2). The demand for child care is expected to continue to increase based on demographic trends, increased availability of subsidies, and welfare to work initiatives.

• **Demand for subsidized early child care** For families with incomes below the median income for a 4-person Massachusetts family—approximately $45,000 in the mid-1990s (6)—the cost of child care can easily exceed rent and car payments. But few of these parents have access to state-subsidized care. In Fall 1997, for example, there were only 56,595 slots for subsidized early child care in our state (8).

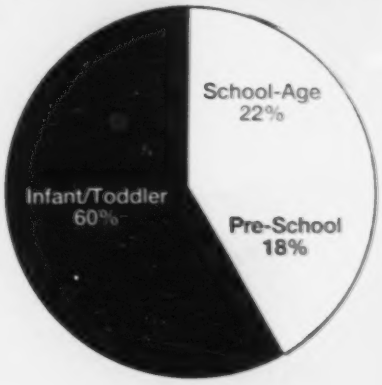
• **The after-school-care problem** Many of our preteens spend their afternoons at home alone without adequate supervision. Some do their homework, but many while away the time watching television or engaging in risky behavior. Unsupervised kids are more than twice as likely as children in after-school programs to use alcohol, tobacco, and marijuana. Still others hang out on the street and get in trouble with the law. One recent national study based on FBI arrest statistics found that juvenile violent crime triples in the hour that school lets out (9).

A Profile of Child Care Needs, 1997

Requests by Type of Care



Ages of Children Needing Care



Source: Massachusetts Child Care Resource and Referral Network

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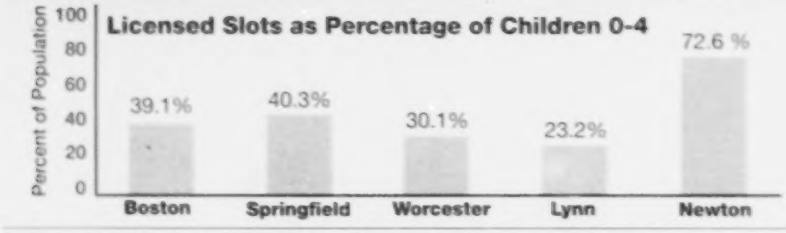
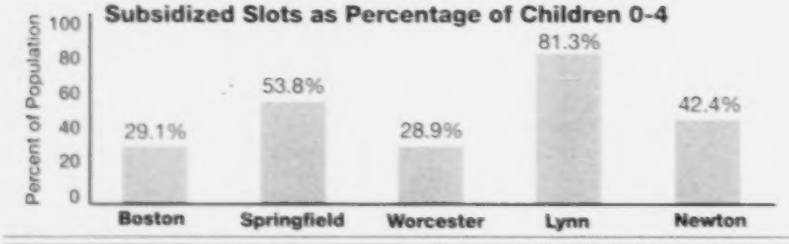
Availability of Child Care

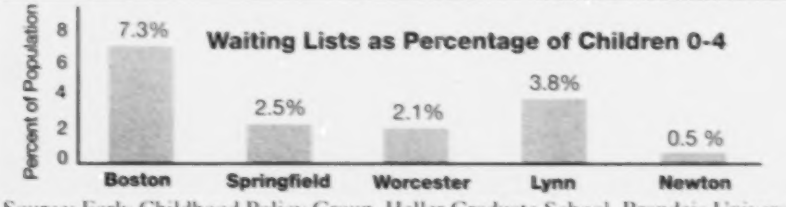
As of December 1, 1997, the number of licensed child care slots for children ages birth through twelve was 196,726 (2). This figure, which includes family child care, group day care programs, and school-age programs, is well below estimated need. Across the state, many providers are unable to accommodate children waiting for care. And the shortage is compounded by mismatches between availability and need: care is in short supply in poor communities; many providers do not accept infants; and few programs are set up to accommodate parents who work nonstandard hours.

- **Supply of state-subsidized care** Waiting lists for subsidized care are long: over 13,000 children were waiting for assistance in February 1998, according to the Office of Child Care Services. The demand for subsidized care is growing as more families move off of welfare and into the work force (10).
- **Supply of school-age care** With only 41,000 licensed school-age slots and a statewide elementary school population of nearly 500,000 kids, Massachusetts is experiencing an after-school care crisis (2,6). Despite efforts by the Boston School Age Child Care project and its many partners to increase school-age care, the Boston MOST Community Assessment found that the current supply of programs serves only 5.7% of the city's 5- to 12-year-olds.
- **Location of child care services** Although an overwhelming majority of parents prefer child care near home, that need is hard to satisfy in some communities. Research confirms that a community's income level determines the amount of child care available. The Commonwealth's high income communities are better served than its poor communities. For example, one community-by-community analysis found licensed capacity in Newton adequate to serve 73% of Newton's population of birth through 4-year-olds; while only 23% of Lynn's children in this age group could be accommodated in licensed programs (11).

Licensed Care and Subsidized Care for Preschoolers: A Comparison of Communities







Source: Early Childhood Policy Group, Heller Graduate School, Brandeis University

Affordability of Child Care

The past 20 years have seen a sharp rise in income inequality in Massachusetts, with poor families growing poorer, wealthy families becoming richer, and middle-income families barely holding their own. The state's poorest families with children earned an average of only about $10,500 per year in the mid-1990s, while middle-income families averaged about $47,000 (12). For all families except those at the top of the economic ladder (average income $132,000), paying for child care is a heavy burden.

The cost of child care is determined by type of care, child's age, location of the program, and quality of care. Because of required child to staff ratios, infant and toddler care is more expensive than preschool and after-school care. Center-based care is often more expensive than home-based care. Cost also varies from town to town and neighborhood to neighborhood in Massachusetts. In the City of Boston, for example, the average annual cost for one infant in full-time care ranges from $10,500 in East Boston to $15,100 per year in Back Bay/Beacon Hill, according to a recent study. The cost burden is also unequally distributed: average annual income for households with children in East Boston is $26,500 per year, while in Back Bay/Beacon Hill it is $136,800 per year (13).

Costs for One Preschool Child as a Percentage of Income in Selected Boston Neighborhoods if Parents Paid the Full Cost

Source: Boston EQUIP Inventory, 1997

To offset the high cost of care, the state subsidizes spaces through contracts with child care and early education programs and makes vouchers available to low-income parents. Subsidized care for preschoolers is also available in Head Start programs and state-funded prekindergarten programs. Subsidized care is available to parents re-entering the workforce from welfare, working parents who earn less than 50% of the state's median income, and families with special needs. Eligible families may choose a licensed child care program or an informal child care provider. Informal care provided by a relative or neighbor is reimbursed at the rate of roughly $2 per hour. Some of those who use this inexpensive option may be doing so because they have no other choice.

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Quality of Child Care

What should parents expect from a good child care program? Research (13) suggests that in high quality settings:

- **Staff are nurturing and turnover is low.**
- **Caregivers have specialized training and are reasonably well paid.**
- **Child-to-staff ratios are low.**
- **Activities are plentiful and age-appropriate.**
- **Group sizes are small.**
- **Physical facilities are attractive and safe.**
- **Parents are involved in many ways.**

Quality Care Is Linked to Wages, Benefits and Training

Child care workers are one of the highest educated and lowest paid groups in the work force. Their real (inflation adjusted) income has not risen since the late 1980s, and fully 93% earn less than people with equivalent training in other fields (4). Even though Massachusetts ranks relatively high nationally, full-time pay for center-based teachers averages only $17,000 annually (2). Family child care providers may earn even less, and they face a further challenge: because they generally work alone, they find themselves socially isolated. Not surprisingly, annual worker turnover—an estimated 35% in Massachusetts—is nearly 3 times the rate for businesses as a whole and nearly 5 times the rate for public school teachers (14).

Caregivers have few opportunities for professional development. Where training does exist, incentives to participate are few, costs are often extremely high, and few programs offer series of courses linked to professional advancement (14). Only rarely are teachers paid for time spent in such courses or even in staff meetings.

Average Wages of Boston Teachers and Child Care Providers

1995	**Boston Public School Teachers**	**$32,000**
	Centers and Head Start Teachers	**$19,000**
	School Age Child Care Teachers	**$17,250**
	Family Child Care Providers	**$14,000**

Source: Boston EQUIP Inventory, 1997

Lack of Adequate Facilities Compromises Quality Care

Many center-based providers locate their programs wherever they can find inexpensive or donated space—church basements, surplus classrooms. A recent Boston EQUIP study (13) found that 62% of center-based and Head Start programs operate in facilities that were not originally designed for child care. In 1997, child care centers statewide averaged 93% of capacity, leaving little space to serve new children. High real estate costs are preventing providers from opening new sites, but unlike many states, Massachusetts does not provide specific funds for capital financing. In addition, an estimated 500 child care centers in Massachusetts are in need of significant repair. In Boston alone, 20% of child care centers close from 1 to 3 days each year because of a problem with the building.

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Strategies to Improve Accessibility, Affordability, and Quality

Even though every dollar Massachusetts spends on quality child care saves $7 in remedial education, criminal justice, and welfare costs, the state spends a mere $1.18 out of every $100 of tax revenues on child care services. In 1994, for example, Massachusetts spent 5 times as much on prisons as on child care, 11 times as much on highways, and 10 times as much on higher education (15).

Families with kids in college expect and receive government aid: consumers across the nation typically pay only 23% of the costs of higher education. In contrast, families with young children, who are usually less well-off financially than families with older children, typically pay 60% of early child care costs (16). **While Massachusetts commits more resources to child care than many other states (15), it must increase its investment so that working parents can be assured that their children are safe and secure. Massachusetts must make a commitment to improve:**

Accessibility and Affordability

- **Fully fund existing financial subsidy programs that make child care affordable to low-income families.** With more than 13,000 children on the waiting list for subsidized care, current funding levels are woefully inadequate. Parents should not be forced to choose low quality care arrangements because of financial barriers to obtaining good care.
- **Expand the availability of school-age programs in both school and nonschool settings.** Funding is needed for existing under-funded programs and to provide critical support to create and expand programs.

Quality

- **Raise reimbursement rates the state pays to providers to allow them to improve staff pay and to recruit and retain a high quality child care work force.** Compensation for caregivers should be equivalent to other professionals with comparable education, experience, and job responsibilities. The provision of adequate benefits is a crucial component of caregivers' compensation.
- **Promote formal education and training opportunities for child care personnel to improve their ability to interact effectively with children and to create developmentally appropriate environments.** Child care professionals should be encouraged to seek additional professional preparation and should be rewarded for doing so.
- **Support capital investment to increase and improve the supply of quality child care facilities and make buildings safe and accessible.** Physical facilities are an important component of overall program quality. Funds are needed for capital improvement and for the development of new quality child care centers.

You Can Make a Difference!

For information on how you can get involved in building Massachusetts resources for children, contact the following organizations:

Massachusetts Campaign for Children (a public education and mobilization initiative that is building an informed and active citizen constituency for children in Massachusetts) 14 Beacon Street, Suite 706, Boston, MA 02108; 617-742-8555; mail@masskids.org; www@masskids.org.

Parents United for Child Care (a multiracial, grassroots organization of low and moderate income parents committed to increasing quality, affordable child care in Massachusetts) 30 Winter Street, 7th floor, Boston, MA 02108; 617-426-8288; ace@pucc.com

Boston EQUIP/Associated Day Care Services (a collaboration of Boston's childhood care and education community that strives to enhance child care quality by focusing on accreditation, training, salaries, parent engagement, and facilities) 95 Berkeley Street, Suite 306, Boston, MA 02116; 617-695-0700; jsachs@channel1.user1.com

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Photographs

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